

Romans 1 (ESV¹)

October 31, 1517 is traditionally celebrated as the date of Luther's posting of the 95 Theses on the church door at Wittenberg. In some sense, this October might thus be thought of as the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther's study of the letter to the Romans was instrumental in him coming to understand the doctrine of justification by faith. It thus seems appropriate to begin a series of lessons on the book of Romans.

Paul wrote Romans to a church that he didn't know personally and had no part in founding. Who took the Gospel to Rome we don't know. The best guess is that it was the Jewish pilgrims mentioned in **Acts 2:15** on the Day of Pentecost. The letter was probably written in about 55-57 AD, likely from Corinth at the end of Paul's 3rd missionary journey, as he wants the Gentile churches of Asia to prepare an offering to be taken to the impoverished Jewish brethren in Jerusalem. At the time of writing, the church is thought to be mixed Gentile/ Jewish with probably more Gentiles than Jews.

Romans is the most theological of Paul's letters. It was perhaps written to introduce Paul and his ministry to the Romans. Paul says in the letter that he intends to visit (and perhaps use Rome as a jumping off place to carry the Gospel into Spain). Some speculate that it is a kind of "last will and testament" of the Apostle's theology. To some degree it may have been addressed to a mixed Jewish/Gentile congregation to help them sort out how the Jewish law fits with the Christian Gospel and how the 2 groups are to get along in the church. The discussion of the "strong and weak" in the letter may indicate frictions between the two groups.

The first 7 verses of the book follow the standard form of a salutation for letters of the time. There are 1) the author, 2) the addressee, and 3) a greeting. Paul makes this into a single 7-verse sentence, loaded with his characteristic digressions and asides.

Romans 1:1 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

Paul calls himself a bond-servant or slave completely at his master's disposal. Jesus is Lord/owner/the one who calls the shots for Paul. In some ways this is a low position, but most truly it is the highest honor to be a servant of God. This is what the Old Testament prophets called themselves.

Paul was "called." This whole thing wasn't Paul's choosing or idea. It wasn't something that he applied for or chose, it's what God assigned to him. That, in truth, is the way it is for all of us. We may not be called as apostles, but it's God who ordains us to be what He makes us to be.

Paul was "an apostle." The Jewish idea of an apostle was one legally authorized to act the representative with the full authority of the one who commissioned him.

Paul was "set apart." That's interesting word choice. The word "Pharisee" meant to be "set apart" from Gentiles and their evil ways. By God's doing, Paul, former Pharisee, is now set apart to work for the salvation of those self-same Gentiles.

Paul was set apart "for the Gospel 'of God'." The origin of the Gospel is God Himself.

2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,

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God "promised beforehand." This is not "plan B" or some afterthought on God's part. This is God's plan from eternity past. This is in continuity with the entirety of the Biblical record. The Old Testament Scriptures attest to the Gospel of Christ.

3 concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh

This is the good news concerning God's Son. The substance of the Gospel is Jesus, who had a human lineage from King David.

4 and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,

This is in no sense a statement that before the resurrection Jesus was less than the Son of God. Rather, it's a statement that His identity was made public and evident to all through the resurrection. Jesus, who was meek and lowly during His earthly ministry, was given God's powerful affirmation in the resurrection. Jesus Christ/Messiah/Anointed One is "our Lord."

5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations,

"through Him" and "for the sake of His name" Paul received grace and was commissioned as an Apostle. Paul's consistent focus is Jesus and His honor and His will. The focus is not Paul's honor or desires, or even what we would call Paul's "needs." The goal of the Gospel is the honor of Christ.

Paul received "grace." Often this word has the meaning "God's undeserved favor given to sinful men." It is also a synonym for power/ability from God. Here it is power from God to carry out the commission from God to be an Apostle, to call people from among the Gentiles to Faith in Jesus.

The apostleship Paul has is to bring about "the obedience of faith." For Paul, true faith always produces obedience to God and His rule. There is no separation in Paul's mind between faith and obedience.

This obedience is "among all the nations." The scope of the Gospel is all nations. It's not just for Jews, but Gentiles as well.

6 including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

This "all nations" is "including you" (Romans) "who are called." Paul's emphasis here is upon God's sovereignty and initiative in salvation. Stott sums up the first 6 verses by saying the good news is "the Gospel of God, *about* Christ, *according to* Scripture, *for* the nations, *unto* the obedience of faith, and *for the sake of* the Name."

7 To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Romans are "called to be saints." "saint" comes from Hebrew and Greek roots meaning to be set apart or Holy. A saint is a saint not because of personal merit but because of God's love and call. Paul is applying this Old Testament term to the mixed Gentile/Jewish congregation, and in the process emphasizing that a world-wide church has been ordained to have the kind of place in God's workings that was formerly only Israel's. God's amazing kindness to us is that rebellious fallen people are called by God to be in relationship with Him."

Paul wishes them "grace and peace." grace/"charis" is New Testament/Christian language/thought. It summarizes the Gospel in a word. peace/"shalom" is Old Testament/Hebrew language/thought. It's wholeness and well-being. Both grace and peace come only from God through Jesus.

Verses **8-15** now provide Paul's readers some more background on himself and his occasion for writing. They describe his attitude towards this church that he's never visited, and speak of his longing to visit.

8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

This faith of the Roman Christians is reported over the all the world. It must therefore be something that is tangible, with concrete visible consequences.

Matthew 5:14 You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.

When Paul says "your faith is proclaimed" he's probably saying "the Christian Faith as you hold it." Their zeal for Christ and love for each other was evident to all.

Romans 1:9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you

10 always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

Paul says, "God is my witness." This is almost an oath. No kidding, Paul prays constantly for the Romans. Remember that he doesn't have a history with this particular group, but his concern for the church of Jesus Christ extends beyond the people that he can think of as "his" converts.

Paul's description his devotion to God is to "serve with my spirit/serve with my whole heart." There is nothing either selfish or tentative in Paul's Christianity. 21st century Christians almost always talk about Christianity from human perspectives, in terms of human desires, as if humans were the focus. Paul never talks that way. His perspective is God's and not his situation or circumstances.

Paul hopes to "at last succeed in coming to you." It seems as if the Romans might have been aware that Paul had intended to visit Rome before this. Notice how humble is Paul's asking even to be allowed to visit Rome on behalf of the Gospel. He's not presuming to tell God how things should be, or even to say that he knows for certainty the will of God in the specific matter.

11 For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—

12 that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

There is real humility in Paul's attitude toward other believers. He IS indeed the Apostle, the missionary, God's appointed servant and one of the most brilliant men of all history. But he recognizes that a visit will benefit both the Romans and himself. No Christian, not even Paul, stands above or outside the church.

13 I want you to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

14 I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.

The Apostle is "under obligation." He is in debt in the sense that Christ has given him something most precious and commissioned him to pass it to others. He is in debt to others until he passes to them what Christ has put in his trust. His preaching is not something optional, but rather a sacred duty. Barclay's rendering is, "... because of all it is my duty to give to them, I am under obligation to all sorts of men." ... "Greeks and barbarians" are both the cultured and the non-cultured. Stott: "Good news is for sharing. We are under obligation to make it known to others."

15 So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

With verse **15** the introduction is over. Paul comes to the statement of his theme or main thesis that is going to be developed in subsequent pages. Verses **16** and **17** contain the heart of Paul's understanding of the Gospel.

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

"I am not ashamed." Humanly speaking, Paul has plenty of pressure to cop out. He's in a pagan world, writing to people in the power center of the known world about an apparently obscure Jewish carpenter/rabbi that people think is dead and gone. He's insisting that this Jesus is not only resurrected and alive, but is the only means of salvation, the only way to God. But Paul is not ashamed. May we be like him!

The Gospel is "the power of God." The word "dynamite" has the same root as the word rendered "power" here. But God's power is not of earthly origin or like earthly power. In fact, it is in opposition to earthly power.

The Gospel is the power of God "for salvation." This is for salvation from the wrath and judgment of God, for salvation from sin and death, for salvation to and for the glory for which the entire created universe is longing. It is power of God for eternal life.

This is "to everyone." This is not a matter that is for some and against others. The offer is a universal offer.

It is to everyone who "believes." The Greek tense here means that this is an ongoing thing. This is "believes/has faith." Biblical faith is absolute trust/belief/commitment/total acceptance. It means being utterly sure of the truth and staking all in time and eternity on that truth. It is trusting in/relying upon/abandoning oneself to God in response to the concrete acts of kindness of God. It's the radical choice to entrust one's destiny to God.

This is "to the Jew first and also to the Greek." In what sense is "first" to be understood? The Jews were given the first opportunity/priority but weren't given jurisdiction. They don't own it. They were chosen first in time, but it's not limited to them. Apparently the Greek has an untranslatable participle in this construction that implies a fundamental equality between Jews and Gentiles.

17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

"the righteousness of God" is "right standing with God." This carries the sense of acquitting or conferring a righteous status on someone. It is being "in the right" with God, being properly related to God in spite of our moral imperfection. God treats a sinner as if he or she had not been a sinner at all. Instead of treating us as criminals to be obliterated, He treats us as children to be loved.

This is "of God." It's from God. It's not on the basis of what man does, but on the basis of what God has done.

This "is revealed," it "is (being) revealed." The righteousness from God is being revealed in the Gospel. It has a dynamic impact.

It is "from faith." That is, what produces the right standing is (from the human side) reliance upon God.

It is "from faith for faith." It is thoroughly about faith, from first to last. There is no other possible basis for right standing with God.

"The righteous shall live by faith" is a quote from the prophet Habakkuk.

Habakkuk 2:4 Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.

Barclay said, "It is the man who is in right relationship with God as a result of his faith who will live." Edwards wrote, "It is the one who is justified by faith who will live." The idea is that God grants life to those who are first made right through faith.

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

As it is, humanity is "in the wrong" with God, morally bankrupt and under the righteous judgment of God, deserving His wrath, desperately needing His mercy and pardon. If the universe is going to be a moral universe and a sane place, evil must be dealt with. That inevitable, upright, appropriate, just dealing with evil is God's wrath. This wrath, says Paul, is not something that is exclusively reserved for the end of time, but is daily revealed in our world. Sin has its awful consequences, and we see them all around us. And those consequences come to humans not by accident. We choose them. We choose God's wrath against sin. We're not ignorant, because light is unavailable. We're ignorant because we actively dodge the light. Human ignorance of the ways and law of God is a deliberate ignorance. We stifle the truth about God because we don't want to submit to it. We don't like its implications about His claims to our obedience.

19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

Paul does not intend that we hear him say that exhaustive knowledge about God (or even knowledge adequate for salvation) is available in nature without His revelation of Himself. But there is enough that is plain in creation to set an honest heart on the right track, seeking to know Him and His will. And that is not the path humans typically take.

20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

There is enough light evident in the creation to keep anyone who is honestly seeking God from worshipping anything in creation. And so if we dodge the light, fail to embrace the truth about Him that is available to us, we are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

The right response of a heart that sees God is humility and thankfulness for life and breath. The right response is worship. Where there is none of that, there is increasing darkness. That's true in the large. That's true individually. We are personally either moving toward the light or into darkness. Human societies are either moving toward the light or further into darkness. A person or society that purposely suppresses knowledge of God will experience increasing confusion, futility, chaos, and darkness.

22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

"they became fools" in the Biblical sense. They were not unintelligent, but morally obtuse and unable to tell what is genuinely good from that which is genuinely bad.

23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Humans who are "too clever" to worship their Creator will, in the end, worship themselves or something (e.g. as silly as the environment or political ideology or social "progress") of their own imagination. Humans will replace the true and living God that they cannot control and who deserves their worship and obedience with something less demanding that they can control. Moderns pretend to laugh at ancient idols, and then turn and make their own.

What follows here are six of the most painful-to-read verses in all of Scripture. They describe the horrible downward spiral from man's special place as created in God's image for fellowship with Him to degradation to the lowest possible state. This is what inevitably follows from failure to worship God.

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

"God gave them up ..." These are bone-chilling horrifying words. God let them have what they wanted. We sometimes think of God's judgment on sin as only coming in the form of fire and brimstone falling on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah or the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. But the worst of it is that He draws back and lets humanity wallow in its self-chosen misery. Individual lives come unglued, societies crack and devolve into awful places to live, as fallen depraved human nature is given free reign.

Humans assert their independence from their Creator and declare that they have the right to use their bodies as they please. They dishonor and misuse them and deface the image of God in them.

25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

God's giving humans over to their corrupt desires is "because" of their exchange of reality for the old lie of Satan, that they can themselves be at the center of things, that they can serve their own wishes and desires. How could it be otherwise? What's to be done? Like the Father in the parable of the prodigal son, God lets humanity go down the path to misery that it chooses.

26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;

27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

As Creator, God has the right to declare what is and is not proper behavior and proper use of our bodies. He has the right to tell and has told us that some passions are "dishonorable" and some acts "shameless." He has the right to call some relations "natural" and some "contrary to nature." In our time, we have twisted the meaning of the word "natural" to be something like "what I choose to believe about myself." Paul isn't at all intending such a meaning. He is instead speaking of being consistent with obvious function. And he plainly says that belligerent willful improper use of our bodies according to wrong passions is evidence of a refusal to worship God as Creator, and that it brings His judgment and "giving over" to corruption.

28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

Bad thinking about God, failure to acknowledge His lordship, dodging the light of the common grace of general revelation about His person and nature leads to a debased mind, and all manner of awful behavior. Some has been mentioned in verses 26 and 27. In verses 29 through 31 Paul names 21 other kinds of awful conduct that follows.

29 They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,

"Unrighteousness" is wickedness or unjustness and is opposed to God's law. "Evil" is a general term for pervasive badness. "Covetousness" is greed or passion for more, particularly that which is another's and a desire to promote oneself at the expense of another. "Malice" is depravity or deliberate wickedness. "Envy" is jealousy over the fact that others have something. "Murder" is the outward act of taking a life that springs from inner hatred for or despising of another. "Strife" is contention, quarreling or wrangling. "Deceit" is treachery by words that tricks another for one's own gain. "Maliciousness" is to be habitually set against others for their harm. A "gossip" is one who "whispers" to harm the reputation of others.

30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

A "slanderer" does what a gossip does, but in the open. He or she defames others in public. If one will slander other humans, he or she is not far from slandering the God who made those humans, despising/"hating" his or her Maker. The Greek word behind "insolent" here is *hubris* and intends a kind of pride that flaunts itself against God. "Haughtiness"/arrogance is an attitude of personal superiority that puts oneself above others. "Boasting" is the attempt to gain the admiration of others based on claims to have what one doesn't actually possess. "Inventors of evil" is a horrible description of ones whose creativity in doing wrong far exceeds the acts of those around them. They do evil things that others don't

even think of. In this list of awful sins is "disobedience to parents," something that in our time is largely ignored if not glorified.

31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

"Foolishness" is moral foolishness, not lack of intelligence and it is a moral wrong as much as it is a state, as it has its origin in turning from the light one is given about the universe and the will of God.

"Faithlessness" here concerns "breaking faith," i.e. in failing to follow through with one's commitments. God is completely faithful, never breaking His promises. This evil is to be nothing like Him. To be "heartless" is to be without natural affection. "Ruthlessness" is to be without mercy.

All of this is simply horrid, and the Apostle lays out with crystal clarity that it has its origin in a refusal to honor God and give Him thanks.

32 Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

The final step in this awful spiral into chaos and degradation is not even the practicing of all manner of evil, but coming to depraved assertion that evil is good. It is the substitution of a corrupt morality for God's morality. This is final assault on the very character of God. God's will and law are consistent with His person. To declare what is wrong is right is to declare His person to be wrong. It's ultimate and complete rebellion.